

## THE REFORMATION AND SIXTEENTH-CENTURY MALTA

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The Protestant Reformation, which began in Germany in 1518, met willing sympathizers everywhere in Europe. The condition of the Church had been much the same throughout Christendom: corruption, worldliness, spiritual lassitude, and immorality had everywhere taken the upper hand. It was in consequence of this unchristian attitude of the Church that anticlericalism, together with the Humanist reaction of the Renaissance to these abuses, gained popularity.<sup>1</sup>

This was the atmosphere in which Cardinal Carafa, in July 1542, secured from Pope Paul III the bull *Licet ab initio*, creating a totally reformed Inquisition for Italy. In this position he had to fight against all kinds of Protestant heresies. Books had to be severely censored, as printing helped the spread of such ideas. But it was only in 1559, the year he was elected Pope as Paul IV, that the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* was published. The effect of the Index was soon to become apparent as it enabled the Church to conduct a policing action over all published literature. In Malta the Inquisition enabled the Church to exercise strict control over books and other publications reaching the island, inhibiting their circulation for almost three centuries.

In Sicily the first mention of the Lutheran heresy is dated 1529 at the time of Fra Eremio de Tripedibus, an Augustinian monk of Maratea in the kingdom of Naples, who was also master of Theology. In the opinion of C.A. Garufi, this date is doubtful as Lutheran ideas had, by then, just seeped through the Venetian Republic, then considered the most liberal of Italian States.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike Malta in the times of the Order of St John's rule, the Kingdoms of Naples and Sicily had steadfastly resisted the establishment of the Roman Inquisition. Liberatore mentions the fact that when Charles V tried to introduce it in 1544, the nobility raised considerable objections. They feared that the Viceroy would exploit it to his own advantage, thereby gaining a stronger position. At times, however, heretics, especially in Naples, were sent to Rome to be tried there.<sup>3</sup> The two Kingdoms, like the rest of the Spanish Empire, including tiny Malta, were greatly influenced by prohibited literature coming mainly through France.<sup>4</sup>

### MALTESE SOCIETY IN THE EARLY PERIOD OF THE ORDER'S RULE

To appreciate the influence of Lutheranism in Malta, one must first consider the structure of Maltese society then. The arrival of the Order had led to a rapid in-

<sup>1</sup> G.R. Elton, *Reformation Europe* (Glasgow, 1963), 104.

<sup>2</sup> G.A. Garufi, "Contributo alla Storia dell'Inquisizione", in *Archivio Storico Siciliano*, n.s. xl (1915), 308-309, in which he refers to the *Biblioteca Comunale di Palermo*.

<sup>3</sup> P. Liberatore, *Della Polizia Ecclesiastica nel Regno delle Due Sicilie* (Naples, 1852), 139-40.

<sup>4</sup> Garufi, 346. In practice, prohibited literature could only have a very limited effect on Sicily and Naples. The majority of Lutheran sympathizers were mostly grammar-school teachers who could influence culture but did not occupy important offices in the Government or elsewhere. F. DeStefano, *Storia della Sicilia dall'XI al XIX secolo* (Rome/Bari, 1977), 145-6.

crease in population. The knights and their *familiari* were centred around the Borgo, together with 5,000 Rhodians of whom 4,000 were not paid directly by the Order.<sup>5</sup> The Eight Commissioners' report of 1524 gave the population of Malta as 17,000.<sup>6</sup> By 1530 it rose to 25,000, one-fifth of which consisted of knights and their retainues.<sup>7</sup>

Population declined after the disaster of 1551 in Gozo, when the great majority of Gozitans, estimated to have been around 5,000, were taken slaves by the Berbery pirates. Furthermore, the fear of a siege led to the evacuation of the *gente inhabile* from 1552 to the siege of 1565. These people fled to the southern coasts of Sicily. The siege itself further decimated the population. In fact, Bosio asserts that 9,000 had lost their lives during the siege,<sup>8</sup> giving the population figures then at 20,000 excluding the Order and its retainue.

Until 1565, the Maltese islands had two centres of activity. The old town of Malta, Mdina, was the seat of the Municipal Government. Like any other town of the Kingdom of Sicily, it had rights which included that of receiving a regular supply of wheat from Sicily tax free. Mdina was the centre of all agrarian activity on the island and the landowners made it a point to have a house in the town. This gave them the possibility of a say in the Town Council and in its daily business together with better social opportunities.

The coming of the Order of St John, however, meant the establishment of a new seat of Government at the Borgo, outside the old Fort St. Angelo. The Order had a navy and wanted to keep in touch with events in Europe, which was only possible if they had a base near the harbour. Another important factor was that St Angelo was the best-fortified area of Malta: Mdina's walls were old and crumbling. It was in the Order's interest to fortify the harbour on the same lines that the island of Rhodes had been. In this way apart from members of the Order and their retainue, the Borgo included a new entrepreneurial class of Maltese coming from the countryside in search of a better future. Moreover, newcomers from abroad came to merge with the ever increasing population around the Borgo.

Although an island off the coast of Sicily, previously out of touch with the rest of Europe, Malta was fast becoming a mixed cosmopolitan centre. It soon became increasingly exposed to Protestant influence. The Borgo area, the Order's seat of Government, was undoubtedly most exposed to heresy, and soon proved to be contagious, infecting the educated sectors of society. By 1546, four years after the establishment of the Holy Office in Rome, the Bishop of Malta, acting as Inquisitor, compiled the trial of 28 persons who were accused of heresy and Lutheran practices.<sup>9</sup> Don Andrea Axac and most of his followers were included, but there is also

<sup>5</sup> G. Bosio, *Dell'Istoria della Sacra Religione et Illustrissima Militia di S. Giovanni Gerosolimitano*, iii (Rome, 1602)2.

<sup>6</sup> Bosio, 29-31; L. De Boisgelin, *Ancient and Modern Malta* ii (London, 1804) 15-18.

<sup>7</sup> J. Quintin d'Autun, *The Earliest Description of Malta*, (Lyons, 1536) trans. H.C.R. Vella (Malta, 1980) gives a total of 20,000 Maltese. In NLM Univ. 1.f.187, the total number of Maltese is 18,000, while Bosio (passim) gives the total as 25,000, of which one-fifth were members of the Order.

<sup>8</sup> Bosio, 711.

<sup>9</sup> AIM. Vol.I. case 1. April 1546.

mention of people residing in the Borgo, including members of the Order.

### THE CASE OF SIMON PROVOST – MASTER OF THE MINT

One of these was Simon Provost, born in 1526 (at his trial on 13 August, 1574 he claimed to be 48 years old). He resided at the Borgo (by then known as Vittoriosa) and was Master of the Mint. He was born in Vantiana, Flanders, the son of a celebrated Flemish painter Giovanni (Jan Provoost) and Isabella Leone (presumably his second wife).<sup>10</sup> Isabella had to bring up her son, as his father died when Simon was barely three years old, at Valenciennes where the father was born. When he reached the age of ten (*così giovanello*) he left his mother to enter an apprenticeship with a master sculptor at Antwerp, where he stayed for another six years. After his second visit to Rome, he came to Malta where he remained until his death. In 1575 Simon Provost declared to Dusina, Apostolic Delegate of the Holy Office, that he had come to Malta because his “uncle called *Mastro Michele*”, was “also Master of the Mint and after his death I remained in the Mint as Master”.<sup>11</sup>

Simon Provost mentioned some failings in his private life. While in Rome, for example, he had wounded a man in a brawl, but he was never sent to prison, even though the man eventually died; “since I was provoked by him, I was pardoned”. Provost further admitted that he kept a concubine, Isabella, since the siege of 1565, which he rightly calculated (in 1574) to be nine years before the trial. From this relationship they had a daughter, Lucretia, but although he sustained both mother and daughter he did not keep them at home.<sup>12</sup> When asked whether he confessed and received Holy Communion, Provost pointed out that his confessor had ordered him to stop living in concubinage. But he had found a way out. “When I confess I leave her (Isabella) in advance and after confession I go back to her.” Hence it was possible for him to receive communion twice a year according to the Jubilees.<sup>13</sup> Seven months later, on 25 March 1575, under torture, Provost begged his torturers to stop inflicting pain as he had an order from the Grand Master to do some gilding on the galleys. Furthermore, he complained of suffering from a venereal disease (*Mal francese*) which, he said, was very painful, especially while at work in the Dock.<sup>14</sup>

On the whole it seems that Provost was very esteemed in the Order, even though he was not a professed member. He was questioned by the Apostolic Delegate,

<sup>10</sup> Information on Jan Provost is still fragmentary. He appears to have been born in 1462, somewhere near Valenciennes where he married Jeanne de Quarombe, widow of Simon Marmion before 1491. His name appears in the guild-list of Antwerp in 1493, but in the next year he became Master at Bruges, where he died in 1529. Jan Provost had met and befriended Dürer in 1520-21. One of his best known works, *The Last Judgement*, was painted for the Bruges Town Hall in 1525, escaping the ravages of the Reformation by a lucky chance. Only a handful of paintings are at present attributed to Jan Provost with any degree of certainty. (Information kindly supplied by Mr D Cutajar of the National Museum of Fine Arts.)

<sup>11</sup> AIM, Criminal Proceedings, Vol.167, f.7, August 1574.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, f.12

Dusina, assisted both by the Prior of the Conventual Church, Fra Antonio Cressino, and the Vice-Chancellor of the Order, Fra Tommaso Gargallo (later to be appointed Bishop of Malta).<sup>15</sup>

Provost's position as Master of the Mint was significant in a fast-growing society under an Order of Knights which was striving hard to obtain the status of a sovereign State. This could be demonstrated ostentatiously by the striking and issue of coins in the name of the Grand Master.

In fact, Simon Provost was friendly not only to various knights of the Order, some of whom called him "brother" after the Lutheran practice; he was also in close contacts with the Grand Master himself. Provost had in fact informed the Grand Master, La Valette, in the 1560s, of this fraternity, alleging that it was not to his liking. Although first denounced on 21 February 1564 by Dionisio Xerri of Mdina,<sup>16</sup> (that is, when Bishop Cubelles was Pro-Inquisitor) Provost was only brought before the Tribunal on 13 August 1574 (during Dusina's visit) emphasizing that by then nothing could stop the Apostolic Visitor from proceeding against the highly-protected in Maltese society.

## PRINTING AND ITS IMPACT ON MALTESE SOCIETY

Provost, from Flanders, a centre of great economic and cultural significance, knew how to read, even though perhaps not very fluently (*Io so legere se non troppo bene*). He admitted to have owned a lot of books. These consisted mostly of books of geometry, perspective, and other related subjects. He even admitted to have obtained from a priest a French translation of the Bible. The priest, we are told, was eager to depart with it,<sup>17</sup> as the church insisted on the authenticity of the text of St Jerome and was suspicious of translations.<sup>18</sup> This admission led to further suspicion of Provost by the Inquisition and made his position worse.

The invention of printing meant that people could buy more books at a lower cost, while it provided literary men with a more varied and richer selection of books than previously. L. Febvre and H.J. Martin give a total of 150,000 – 200,000 editions of printed books for the period 1500 – 1600.<sup>19</sup> Printing was introduced in Sicily in 1478 when presses were set up in Palermo and Messina. Catania and other minor centres, like Monreale, all had their own presses by the early sixteenth century. Even in small places, like Nazzarino and Militello, presses were by then already established.<sup>20</sup>

Events leading to the Reformation had shown the enormous power of the printed word, and it was for this reason that the Roman Church had launched the *Index* in full vigour by 1559. Knowledge of the power of the press, however spread among

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, f.1.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, ff.2-3.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, f.10-14, September 1574.

<sup>18</sup> E.L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, i (Cambridge University Press, 1979) 327.

<sup>19</sup> L. Febvre & H.J. Martin, *The Coming of the Book*, trans. D. Gerard (London, 1976), 262.

<sup>20</sup> De Stefano, 147-8.

other Catholic countries of Europe, like France, Italy, and Spain quickly.<sup>21</sup>

Amongst the new features of the *Index* of 1559, issued by Paul IV, was the simultaneous banning of books and authors, a factor which had far-reaching consequences. It meant that an author's entire work could be banned, as was the case with Erasmus. This preliminary attitude was further consolidated by the issuing of another *Index* at the end of the Council of Trent, granting authorities even greater power. This included the output of unauthorized biblical editions and vernacular translations, against which edicts were issued in Catholic areas.<sup>22</sup> But how far were these books accessible to the man in the street?

## EDUCATION IN REFORMATION EUROPE

The educational achievements of the post-Reformation period must be set against a background of widespread ignorance. It is probable that half the men and more than half the women were illiterate, even in the more advanced European states.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless there is evidence that literacy was far more widespread in the sixteenth century than it has often been thought, if only one takes into account the number of persons appearing before the Inquisition, accused of owning or perusing prohibited books in various parts of Catholic Europe.<sup>24</sup> By the middle of the sixteenth century, the printed book had been produced in sufficient quantities that made it accessible to anyone who could read.<sup>25</sup>

Why was this possible? It was mainly thanks to the better opportunities for instruction which were then more extensive than ever before. Popular education hardly ever included Latin, which was usually taught in Grammar schools and Universities for specialized learning. In this case non-Latinists made some progress in their studies through private reading, since teaching in the vernacular was limited to elementary subjects, like reading, writing, simple arithmetic, and catechism.<sup>26</sup> Sometimes teachers were well-intentioned individuals who gave their services free; at other times they were simply poor men or women out to make an honest penny; these were mostly illiterates who taught in an amateurish way, and very carelessly.

In Dusina's Apostolic Visitation of 1575 one gets an indirect reference to this type of schooling. When asked whether he held doctrine lessons at his Parish, the Rector of the Annunciation Church of Vittoriosa, Don Antonio Vassallo, said that he did not have to, as the children went to school.<sup>27</sup> When, nine days later, on 20 February 1575, the Apostolic Visitor asked the Parish Priest of Valletta, Don Gaspare Prato, the same question, the answer was that he gave no catechism lessons

<sup>21</sup> G.H. Putnam, *The Censorship of the Church of Rome, and its Influence upon the Production and Distribution of Literature*, i (New York & London 1906), 4.

<sup>22</sup> Eisenstein, 347.

<sup>23</sup> R.R. Bolgar, "Education and Learning", in *New Cambridge Modern History*, ed. R.B. Wernham, iii (Cambridge University Press, 1971) 427.

<sup>24</sup> C. Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller*, trans. J&A Tedeschi, (London, 1980) 29-30.

<sup>25</sup> Febvre & Martin, 262.

<sup>26</sup> Bolgar, 427.

<sup>27</sup> NLM. *I.ih.* 643, 457.

as there were no children in Valletta.<sup>28</sup> There is enough evidence to show that although Valletta was already the official capital of Malta, it was still uninhabited, except perhaps for the workers.

It seems that these elementary schools were fairly common in Malta at the time. The case of Isabetta Caruana, widow of Joanello of Rabat, Gozo, is a clear example. Isabetta taught catechism to girls from the time of the siege of 1565 up to the end of the century.<sup>29</sup> She was so highly interested in the girls' welfare that she gave alms for the customary endowment of seven poor girls.<sup>30</sup>

Isabetta appeared before the Inquisition, accused of teaching catechism wrongly. She said, among other things, that the Virgin bore Christ from her breast (*men chobihia guelditu*). She even related that the monk who instructed her at Mdina had once told her and the other girls that Christ had his passion when he was only four months old, the time from Christmas Day to Holy Week. The Inquisition was preoccupied because she taught such things to young girls.<sup>31</sup>

The case of Isabetta reveals that humble individuals like herself, or the monk who taught her at the Convent, although badly organized and their teaching casual and erroneous contributed towards the enhancement of literacy. It was through efforts such as Isabetta's and the monk's that a relatively large number of people learned how to read and write.

In these and similar circumstances one would not expect a large number of people to know Latin. It was at that time that Latin began to lose ground in Europe. The reading public was becoming increasingly a lay public comprising women, tradesmen, and others with hardly any knowledge of the language.<sup>32</sup> This was the main reason why the leaders of the Reformation had chosen to write in the vernacular, while Latin survived only because it continued to be the official language of the Catholic Church.

## SIMON PROVOST AND THE LUTHERAN HERESY

The case of Simon Provost, Master of the Mint, is a particularly interesting case as it sheds a lot of light on heretical practises in Malta in the middle of the sixteenth century. His criminal proceedings at the Tribunal of the Inquisition may be thematically divided into two parts. The first deals with information provided by witnesses on his life, including his attachments to Lutheran sympathizers. The second part consists of information provided by Provost himself on his own life and activities.

The main accuser was the cleric and notary Dionisio Xerri who, on 21 February 1564, gave a detailed account of what he had heard from his father-in-law, Cola dello Re. They were accompanied by Notary Jacobo Baldacchino, Xerri's brother-

<sup>28</sup> NLM, *Lib.* 643, 490.

<sup>29</sup> This was possible as she had spent four years, between the ages of ten and fourteen, with the nuns of the *Monasterio dei Vergini* at Mdina, where a monk instructed the girls.

<sup>30</sup> AIM, Criminal Proceedings 147A, case 4, f.50, 4 May 1599.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, f.48.

<sup>32</sup> Febvre & Martin, 320.

in-law, in the garden of the said Cola dello Re. Among other things, they spoke of the Lutheran sympathies of Coletta Xerri and Simon Provost whom Cola accused of being practising Lutherans, owners of prohibited books by Melancthon, Luther, and Erasmus. Many a time they met and read these books, together with others, in the countryside especially in a place called *Fideni* in the limits of Rabat. When people's tongues would start wagging about their activities, they used to send their books both to the *Sotto Mastro* of Grand Master La Sengle's house, who was a servant-at-arms, and to Fra Honorato Resicato of Nice, Master of the Abacus, the two residing at the Borgo. Cola dello Re, who was a great friend of them, used to overhear them speaking of these matters, as they never doubted his friendship.<sup>33</sup>

Bishop Cubelles, then Pro-Inquisitor of Malta, wanted to know more on this business and sent for another cleric, Lorenzo Falson, to testify. Falson related that his brother Geronimo was friendly to Provost and a member of the school of Don Andrea Axac. When Geronimo used to put forward some heretical opinion, Simon Provost was always first to approve it.<sup>34</sup> This made the Bishop more suspicious of Provost. However, for some unknown reason, the case was not pursued any further, probably because Provost was a member of the Order, which had a special Tribunal for its associates, one which led to certain differences between the diocese and the Order's government.

It was only ten years later that Provost himself was brought before the Inquisition, presided by the Apostolic Delegate, Mgr Pietro Dusina. Provost did his best to show that he was not a heretic and that he simply knew some who were sympathizers. Provost tried to convince the Inquisition that the accusation was unfounded and was levelled for ulterior motives. He mentioned the fact that during La Valette's magistracy probably before the Siege of 1565, a man, serving at the Grand Master's house had a person with him from Mdina who revealed that a treasure had been found. The Mdina man could not make up his mind whether this trove was genuine or not and, probably because of this he had shown it to a Dominican friar. Provost said that he had gone up to Mdina to check; he discovered that the trove was false but that they tried to bribe him to state the opposite. He then informed the Grand Master, who had them imprisoned. Amongst these culprits Provost mentioned Lorenzo Falson, whose brother Geronimo, by 1574, had alleged that Provost had promised to marry their niece. Provost denied this, but Lorenzo continued to accuse him as an accomplice in the false-treasure affair, and also that he was in close contact with Mastro Don Andrea Axac, by 1574 already dead. Provost, informed Grand Master La Valette of all this, who, in turn, assured Provost, that he was *au courant* of events and should not bother.<sup>35</sup>

In another section of his *comparitio*, Provost mentioned contacts between the Lutherans of the Borgo and those of Mdina as well as his personal contacts with Axac. He informed Dusina that Lutherans called each other 'brother'. Both Lorenzo

<sup>33</sup> AIM, Criminal Proceedings 167, case 1, f.2.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., f.3.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., ff.3-4v, 13 August 1574.

and Gieronimo Falson formed part of this circle and one of them had once addressed him by that name. When asked how he knew about their customs if he was not a Lutheran himself, Provost answered that a good number of knights who arrived from France confirmed that Lutherans called each other that way.<sup>36</sup> Provost then confirmed that he was once kissed on the face by Mastro Don Andrea Axac as soon as he entered his school. He was aware that this was a heretic practice from what he had heard in the Palace of the Borgo and Mdina.<sup>37</sup>

A month later Provost was again summoned before Mgr. Dusina, having resolved to reveal all he knew after having been absolved in confession. When asked why he did not come earlier, he pointed out that there was a lot of work (for the Grand Master) which had to be done. This time he admitted that he knew of the existence of a treasure thanks to his friendship with people from Mdina. He related that he became friendly to them because he was very close to Fra Pietro Moquin, a French Knight, then *Gwardamangia* of Grand Master La Valette. On various occasions they went to Mdina where they met Cola dello Re, Gieronimo Falsone, and Don Andrea Axac himself; and they once met Coletta Xerri and Lorenzo Falson.

On one occasion, while talking to Don Andrea Axac, Fra Pietro Moquin, and another man from Mdina, Don Andrea picked a small book and openly declared that there was no Purgatory, that it was illicit to pray to saints as God needed no lawyers, and that there was no need to pray for the dead.

On another occasion, a Saturday evening, Provost and Fra Moquin were at Mdina. Provost asked where they were going to have supper. Moquin took him to Don Andrea's house, which was just outside Mdina gate. Don Andrea had already prepared the table with food; other guests were present. These were mostly Maltese students of Axac and two Chaplains of the Order. Amongst the food offered there was meat – a commodity which was prohibited on a Saturday. To Provost's immediate reaction, he was told that what enters the mouth does no harm, it is what comes out that does harm. Provost then helped himself to the meat.<sup>38</sup>

When asked whether he had ever received communion in the Lutheran manner, Provost's answer was in the negative, but he knew how it was done, and explained, "It is their custom to give a piece of bread to each one present."<sup>39</sup> Provost was probably conscious that explaining such things would incriminate him, so he went on saying that he had never had meat on days prohibited by the Church except on that particular day at the house of Don Andrea Axac. He went on to explain that amongst notorious heretics he knew Fra Pietro Moquin and Pier la Fassia, a French merchant who was a great friend of Lorenzo Falson. Pier La Fassia, was a notorious Lutheran, then living in France, but who was well-known to French merchants in Malta.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., f.5. One should remember that in France previous to the St. Bartholomew Massacre, the Huguenots were very influential. As in the case of Sicily, the rest of Italy, and Spain, most Protestant literature arrived in Malta via France.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., f.6.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., f.9. 14 September 1574.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., f.10.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., f.10v.



Finally, Provost admitted that the Lutherans, notably Antonio Bonello, a medical doctor of Mdina, had tried to convert him to their faith. But they did not succeed. This did not seem to impress the members of the Tribunal, so much so that they pressed him further, and he was even put to the torture. However, by the third session on 24 September, he admitted that there was a time when he believed the heretics were right, but, later on, he refused to meet them in the usual garden, even though Fra Pietro Moquin used to force him to go.<sup>41</sup>

## THE TWO CENTRES OF HERESY

Lutheran ideas first spread in Malta during Bishop Cubelles' term of office – a few years after they were introduced into Sicily. By the 1540s, the French cleric and member of the Order of St John, Don Francesco Gesualdo, who ran a school at the Borgo, also founded *La Confraternità dei Buoni Cristiani*. The members of the *Confraternità* read the works of Luther and Melancthon, even discussing such topics as whether priests should marry. In the Inquisition Archives, the first reference to Don Francesco Gesualdo that I have come across is dated June 1563. He is reported to have read prohibited books with others at his school in the Borgo.<sup>42</sup> Information on Gesualdo's school is contained in the case of Notary Jacobo Baldacchino, who admitted before Bishop Cubelles that in the years 1546-47, when he was still a young man, he had been a student of Don Gesualdo and a member of *La Confraternità dei Buoni Cristiani*.<sup>43</sup> Gesualdo was eventually tried and burned at the stake as a heretic in the Borgo square.<sup>44</sup>

Another sympathizer of Lutheranism in Malta was Don Andrea Axac, a Curate of the Parish of Siggiewi and a Grammar School master at Mdina. Axac was responsible for influencing most of the best educated Maltese citizens of Mdina. In fact, the well-to-do are known to have sent their children to Axac's school. One of these was Francesco Xerri who, on 21 September 1574, when he claimed to be forty years old, said that he had spent from seven to eight years at the school of Axac. That was before he had moved to Naples and Salerno, where he became a lawyer. Axac used to teach him grammar but Xerri maintained his contacts with Axac even after he had left his school.<sup>45</sup> So Axac emerges as a very respected citizen and his eventual downfall must have left considerable impact on Maltese society.

The school of Axac is better documented than that of Don Gesualdo since a number of cases shed light on its various activities. The abjuration of Don Andrea Axac himself at Santa Maria Sopra Minerva, in Rome in March 1562, meant the definite closure of the school.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., f.11v.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 3B, case 34, f.473.

<sup>43</sup> AIM, *Memorie Salviate*, f.18.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., f.17; S. Salelles, *De Materiis Tribunalium S. Inquisitionis*, i (Rome, 1651), 48; see also, C. Cassar, "The First Decades of the Inquisition", *Hyphen*, iv (1985), 208.

<sup>45</sup> AIM, Criminal Proceedings 142, case 5, f.20.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., case 4A, f.27.

## THE SCHOOL OF ANDREA AXAC

Simon Provost spoke of French Knights who imparted heretical practices. He was himself Flemish and therefore lay very much within the orbit of French influence, especially since he must have spoken the language fluently. Members of the Order, suspected of holding heretical views, such as the Knight Fra Pietro Moquin, who by 1574 was *infermiere*, the Prior of the Holy Infirmary itself, the *Sotto Mastro* of Grand Master La Sengle, and the merchant Pietro Jachet were all French. Provost even admitted that many knights who travel through France were quite exposed to Lutheran influences.<sup>47</sup> All these were somehow related to the school of Don Francesco Gesualdo. They all read prohibited books and they did not conform to the practices of the Roman Catholic Church, both before the last session of the Council of Trent had ended in 1564, and even after its reforms were implemented.

In the 1540s and 1550s Don Francesco Gesualdo in the Borgo and his counterpart, Don Andrea Axac at Mdina, had convinced a good number of people to join them. It was only with the establishment of the two Tribunals that heresy was brought under control.<sup>48</sup>

In 1558 Grand Master Juan d'Homedes set up his own Inquisition Tribunal, presided over by three knights and a Chaplain of the Order.<sup>49</sup> This he could do since the Order maintained that its Council had the right to act in cases concerning the faith of its members.<sup>50</sup> The commission was mainly interested in Don Francesco Gesualdo – and had begun to gather information about him.<sup>51</sup>

In 1561 Cubelles also received extra powers as Inquisitor. The Brief, dated 21 October 1561, was published in Malta on 15 July 1562.<sup>52</sup> Issued by Pope Pius IV, it marked a new chapter in the history of the Inquisition.<sup>53</sup> Henceforth, the Bishop was also Inquisitor, while separate prisons, the *Camera Secreta*, and officers-in-charge came into being.<sup>54</sup>

This new Tribunal had its first session on 14 August 1562,<sup>55</sup> and the first accusation was heard three days later.<sup>56</sup> By that time many came forward to declare their faults spontaneously. The several cases of this period indicate the immediate success of the Tribunal.<sup>57</sup> Things kept moving, especially since Bishop Cubelles was assisted by Fra Tommaso de Vio of Gaeta who had come from Rome to help

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 167, case 1.f.5v.

<sup>48</sup> For information on the Tribunal set up by the Order, below.

<sup>49</sup> Salelles, 48.

<sup>50</sup> A. Bonnici, "Evoluzione Storico-Giuridica dei poteri dell'Inquisitore nei processi in materia di Fede contro i Cavalieri del Sovrano Ordine di Malta", *Annales de l'O.S.M. de Malte*, xxvi (1969), 95.

<sup>51</sup> Gesualdo was eventually burned at the stake in the Borgo square for his heretical professions. AIM, *Memorie Salviate*, f.17; Salelles, 48; Cassar, 208. The case of Gesualdo is not included in AIM, Criminal Proceedings. This lacuna could indicate that the records of the Commission appointed by the Grand Master were in fact never incorporated with those of the Inquisitor.

<sup>52</sup> A. Bonnici, *Il-Maltin u l-Inkizizzjoni f'nofs is-seklu Sbatax* (Malta, 1977), 65.

<sup>53</sup> A.P. Vella, *The Tribunal of the Inquisition in Malta* (Malta, 1964), 12.

<sup>54</sup> AIM, *Memorie Salviate*, f.22; Cassar, 209.

<sup>55</sup> Salelles, 53; Cassar, 209.

<sup>56</sup> AIM, Criminal Proceedings, 3B, case 41, ff.500-501.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.; AIM, *Memorie Salviate*, f.22v.

in the proceedings. Fra Tommaso's advice was essential for Bishop Cubelles to act. The new Tribunal had such a great success that Mgr. Salviati opined, that it might have extirpated heresy from Malta had it not been for the Siege of 1565. The Turkish invasion of 18 May 1565 and the eventual death of Cubelles a year later interrupted the functions of the Tribunal. With the arrival of the Turkish fleet, Fra Tommaso de Vio left Malta and the Bishop suspended the Inquisition and dismissed its officers.<sup>58</sup>

Included among the many witnesses brought forward during this period was Notary Dionisio Xerri, the son of Angelo Xerri who had accused Simon Provost of heresy in February 1564.<sup>59</sup> The previous June, Xerri had given a description of Lutheranism in Malta both at the Borgo and at Mdina. The activities of these two circles were in fact the main items of interest to Bishop Cubelles who was then presiding over the Tribunal.

In his confession Xerri revealed a lot of details which were later to be repeated in the case of Simon Provost.<sup>60</sup> Xerri started by mentioning the fact that he had been a student, *discepolo scolaro*, of Don Francesco Gesualdo eighteen years before. There he used to study grammar and was closely connected to Gesualdo, so much so, that Gesualdo confided with him on both domestic and personal matters. Among the visitors to Gesualdo's house at the Borgo, there were the lawyer Petro Stumica, the gunner Natale Cassar, the silversmith Joan Maria Bonello, the medical doctor Antonio Bonello, Joan Francesco Ferrer, Lorenzo Falson, and others whom, he said, he could not recall. These were all intimately related to Don Andrea Axac and his school.

Xerri stated that they used to meet and discuss the Holy Scriptures and read prohibited books which he could not identify since he had forgotten their titles. One day, Don Francesco sent Xerri to fetch a book from Joan Francesco Ferrer advising him neither to open it nor to show it to anyone else. On his arrival in Don Francesco's house, Gesualdo and others started reading it. Xerri could recall the scene vividly and quoted parts of what was read. It said, among other things, that the Sacrament was untrue. They also read another book, written in Sicilian, apparently by a Lutheran who had given it to Don Francesco. Xerri pointed out that this book was eventually handed to another of his students, Notary Jacobo Baldacchino, who used to frequent Don Gesualdo's house.<sup>61</sup>

Xerri then went on to inform the Inquisition that he had studied at the school of Fra Honorato Resicato of Nice, Master of the Abacus, up to ten years before, that is 1553. Lessons were held at the Church of St. Sebastian, also in the Borgo, where Fra Honorato used to praise Luther's ideas with his students and even showed the effigy of Luther, printed on the front page of a book, to Xerri himself. He could not, however, recall what it said as he had not read it. Relying on hearsay, Xerri

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, f.23v.

<sup>59</sup> His witness heard in June 1563, is found in AIM, Criminal Proceedings 3B, case 34. It is, in fact, the main case dealing with people who perused prohibited literature.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 167, case 1, ff.2-3

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 3B, case 34, f.473; also vol.142, case 1, ff.1-3, where this is mentioned in the trial of Dr Petro Stumica, and footnote 43 above.

went on to mention the fact that Fra Honorato was considered to be a public heretic who had fled Nice as a Lutheran: he recalled that this had been revealed to him by another man from Nice.

Xerri then mentioned another period of his school life, the times when he was a student of Don Andrea Axac in 1547. According to his testimony, Axac read Erasmus, publicly, although he was condemned by the Church. According to Xerri who relied on information given him by Don Federico Attard, Axac, in the capacity of Curate of the Siggiewi Parish, used to scandalize the flock by preaching publicly that no one should revere the saints and their images. Axac was even accused that seven years before, he had made fun of a procession which was passing near the Church of St Sebastion. It was then a rainy day and he was sheltering at the Church door where a Don Valentino was also present. On watching the procession pass by, Axac referred to those taking part as animals who adore images.<sup>62</sup>

Xerri added that, while talking with Jacobo Baldacchino and their father-in-law Cola dello Re in the latter's garden, the treasure then discovered was mentioned. Cola said that Coletta Xerri, the Judge of the Civil Courts, Gieronimo Falson, Don Andrea Axac, Master of the School at Mdina, Don Joanne Tis, Don Brandero Caxaro, Fra Pietro (Moquin), Fra Honorato Resicato, and Simon Provost, Master of the Mint, and others were Lutherans who kept books by Luther and Melancthon. Xerri next referred to Cola dello Re's speech on the way these Lutherans practised their religion. Later on, this was described by Xerri once more in the case instituted against Simon Provost.<sup>63</sup>

Another fact which was recalled during the evidence given by Xerri was that the day the Jubilee was published and the Bull fixed to the door of the Cathedral Church, Jacobo Baldacchino his brother-in-law and himself saw Gieronimo Falson, and others whom he could not recall by name, depict an ass on the Bull. The intention was obviously that of ridiculing the Jubilee. Falson was imprisoned for a day or two by the Bishop for this irreverent act.<sup>64</sup>

Finally, Xerri gave a list of what he called 'public heretics'. These included Don Andrea Axac and his followers, Fra Honorato Resicato, and others residing at Borgo, like Fra Pietro Moquin and Simon Provost, here identified as a silversmith.<sup>65</sup>

What is of particular interest in Xerri's denunciation is that one finds here several similarities with that which he later brought up against Provost. It seems that Xerri was far too willing to provide the Inquisition with all necessary details.

There are numerous cases in the Inquisition Archives which betray a common mentality among certain Maltese who were all too ready to denounce their neighbours in order to save their skin. This was possible at a time when the population was small enough for people to be able to get to know each other individually, and for close friendships to spring up naturally and without much effort. No wonder that the Lutheran sympathizers of both Mdina and the Borgo were so close to each

<sup>62</sup> AIM, Criminal Proceedings, 3B, case 34, f.473v.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, ff.474.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, f.476.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, f.476v.

other and whenever trouble arose, the Mdina circle would send compromising literature to the Borgo.<sup>66</sup>

However, such close-knit relationships frequently led to, sometimes, lifelong hatred. Francesco Xerri, a judge of the Civil Law Courts, who on 21 September 1574 appeared before the Inquisition accused of Lutheran sympathy, identified his personal enemies one by one. Marco Inguanes and his sons were first on the list. The Inguanes, being one of the most prominent families of Mdina, had always occupied the best positions in the Municipal Government. Xerri relates how Inguanes and himself had quarrels; on one occasion, Marco's youngest son even drew his sword against Xerri in public. He then mentioned Julianio Xeibe, who as a judge had asked him to favour a man accused of sodomy and villany. Xerri did not heed the words of Xeiba and still tortured the man.<sup>67</sup>

Gossiping was common and it led to a great deal of trouble. The case of an unknown Sicilian painter accused of bigamy, in which Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio was involved, further sheds light on the common talk-telling tendencies among the Maltese. In this case the lawyer, Dr Paulo Cassar, denounced the unnamed painter on 22 July 1607 for having kept two wives, one in Malta and the other at Mussumeli in Sicily. Cassar recalled that he was at the residence of Fra Giacomo Marchese on 14 July where the painter Michelangelo Caravaggio, Fra Giovanni Battista Montalto, P. Maria Bonello, and some house servants were also present. When Fra Marchese and others, including Caravaggio, were called in their turn to give evidence to the Inquisition, it was found that the information imparted by Cassar was all said in banter.<sup>68</sup>

An earlier case, indicating the power such gossip had, concerned the conversion to Christianity of the Maltese Jew, Rafael Ketib, in the late fifteenth century. The accuser, Nardu de Burdinu, a leading figure in the Municipal government of Mdina, was reputed to have calmed down a storm by baptizing a group of Jews on their return from Syracuse in 1469. Some 14 or 18 years later the case was reported to the Pro-Inquisitor and Prior of St Dominic's Priory, Fra Domenico Barthelu on 21 June 1486. Burdinu was in turn accused by the Judge to the Town Council, then defending Ketib. He was depicted as a man who was in the habit of denouncing

numerous Jews and Christians of different crimes, defaming them calumniously and unjustly, and he persisting in his accusations and calumnies from beginning to end. Sometimes he began proceedings in court; yet, he had never made any accusations against Rafaeli, nor has he ever claimed that he was baptized during the course of the last eighteen years.<sup>69</sup>

In a small island like Malta people knew too much about everybody else. This business of interfering in each other's affairs was a great temptation, the more so if one happened to bear a personal grudge. Many people were led to denounce themselves or confess out of fear that a friend or neighbour might do so later. Such

<sup>66</sup> AIM, Criminal Proceedings, 3B, case 34, ff.474, June 1563; *Ibid.*, 167, case 1, f.2, 21 February 1564.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 142, case 5, f.20.

<sup>68</sup> J. Azzopardi, "Caravaggio in Malta: An unpublished document", in *The Church of St. John in Valletta: 1578 - 1978*, ed. J. Azzopardi (Malta, 1978), 16-20; AIM, Criminal Proceedings, 28A, ff.295-8.

<sup>69</sup> For full details on the case of Rafael Ketib, G. Wettinger, *The Jews of Malta in the Late Middle Ages* (Malta, 1985) 95.

fears, counter-denunciations, and similar reactions within small communities increased the awe in which the Inquisition was held.

This practice led to people keeping a close watch on each other, going to the length of asking their confessor whether they should report sinners to the Inquisition.<sup>70</sup> It brought the risk of false testimony, cast doubts upon trustworthiness of witnesses, and easily allowed minor infringements to be swollen into heresy. Inevitably, a tendency such as this further strengthened the far-reaching arm of the Inquisition in Malta.

#### PEOPLE ACCUSED OF OWNING OR PERUSING PROHIBITED BOOKS 1546-1580

Date	Vol.No.	Case No	People under Charge
17 April 1546	1A	1	2
2 September 1561	142	1	1
22 June 1563	142	3	3
1547 - June 1563	3B	34	17
1 September 1563	3B	37	2
1561 - 1566	1A	3	1
3 June 1574	3B	54	2
4 July 1574	3B	44	1
25 August 1574	2B	31	1
30 November 1574	2C	50	1
9 July 1577	1B	35	1
11 November 1577	4A	4	1
10 December 1579	1B	49	1
TOTAL			34

*Source: Aim Proc. Crim.*

One would note that half of those accused of owning prohibited books between April 1546 and December 1579 were denounced in one case. Some of them had been denounced before June 1563, when this case was heard, and some others later.<sup>71</sup> Case 34 of Vol. 3 itself is divided into three parts. The first was heard in 1547, in which four persons were accused before Bishop Cubelles. the second was heard in 1557, when ten persons were accused, four of whom primarily for having read prohibited literature. The third part was heard in June 1563, in which nine were accused of reading prohibited books. The first two parts were at a later stage ap-

<sup>70</sup> "In un'isola attaccatissima alla tradizioni cristiane, le fantasie del popolo diventano molto suscettibili a qualche scandalo pubblico contro il buon costume". A. Bonnici, *Aspetti della Vita Cristiana nell'isola di Malta verso la meta' del Seicento* (Malta, 1974), 10.

<sup>71</sup> See Appendix.

pended to the case of 1563. Those accused included some individuals mentioned by Dionisio Xerri.<sup>72</sup>

One would note that after Dusina's departure from Malta, cases on prohibited literature dwindled down considerably. In fact, from 1575 to 1579, only three persons were accused of perusing prohibited literature. The arm of the Inquisition was growing so powerful that, when the *Guardiano del Porto* allowed Mastro Giovanni Barbieri to bring books for the Maltese friaries from Palermo, an accusation was promptly brought forward and a case opened against him.<sup>73</sup> Later on, the amount of cases against persons reading books prohibited by the *Index* increased. These involved, among others a relatively large number of members of the Order as well as Chaplains. One should note, however, that the open abuse of people who frequented the schools of Don Francesco Gesualdo and Don Andrea Axac had ceased to exist. Those charged with reading prohibited literature were generally individuals who either read out of curiosity or else in the secrecy of their homes.

The establishment of the Inquisition helped to develop an "orthodox" way of life in the Maltese Islands, when previously it was more tolerant and open. This new attitude was the immediate effect of the Counter-Reformation which, as Lucien Febvre states, spread all over Europe. "The Church", he argues, "involved itself in everything".<sup>74</sup>

Undoubtedly, Luther's reform and the Catholic reaction which ensued during the course of the sixteenth century disrupted an atmosphere of unanimity in Europe. The Roman Catholic Church had long been used to dominating all aspects of life in Western Europe and it found it difficult to surrender its spiritual and temporal pre-eminence. The Church was helped by the attitude of the populations in the Catholic South. The Latin culture of the South was probably emotionally ill-disposed to take to heart the rationalizing and rigid mentality set in motion by the Protestant Reformers in Transalpine Europe. Braudel asserts that "Latin civilizations said no to the Reformation from the mountains".<sup>75</sup> If some Lutheran and later Calvinist notions gained some converts in Spain and Italy, this was only among a special educated élite who frequently expected the Church to reform itself.<sup>76</sup>

In Malta Lutheranism seems to have spread; thanks to the cosmopolitan atmosphere created upon the Order's arrival. It is, in fact, doubtful whether this development would have occurred had Malta remained a distant, essentially rural, demanial province of the Kingdom of Sicily. Nonetheless, the educated élite were definitely not pleased with the ecclesiastical state of affairs; this is evidenced by their search for remedies in the reading of Lutheran and other prohibited literature.

No wonder that books by Erasmus, Martin Luther, and Melancthon, the three

<sup>72</sup> See Appendix.

<sup>73</sup> AIM, Criminal Proceedings, 4A, case 5, ff.33-36, 12 November 1577.

<sup>74</sup> L. Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century - The Religion of Rabelais*, trans. B. Gottlieb (Harvard University Press, 1982), 349.

<sup>75</sup> F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, ii, 2nd ed., trans. S. Reynolds, (Glasgow, 1973), 766..

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 765.

great reformers of the early sixteenth century, together with translations of the Bible were arduously read and apparently followed *ad litteram*. No wonder, too, that when in 1559 the list of prohibited books came out, it was directed against heretical works and translations of the Bible in particular.<sup>77</sup> This hit the educated nectar of society in Malta, including a few knights from the 1560s onwards, and continued to gain strength with the coming of the Apostolic Visitor to the island in 1574. By the 1580s Malta had a very different intellectual climate. It was more stable and secure, thanks to the building of new fortifications, a new city, and an expanding population. Above all, the Church had by then gained much greater influence over the population. Through these faithful proceedings the Church managed to establish a complete hegemony over Maltese society, a state of affairs which continued unchanged and uninterrupted in the centuries that followed.

<sup>77</sup> H.Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition* (New York, 1965), 98.



## APPENDIX

### PERSONS ACCUSED OF HAVING PERUSED AND/OR OWNED PROHIBITED BOOKS 1546–1580

Date	Vol./Case/ff.	Accused	Origin & Residence	Accusation	Comments
17.4.1546	1A:1:3-33	English Commendatore	English – Borgo	owned prohibited books	Knight of the Order
17.4.1546	1A:1:3-33	Fra Hieronimo de Vitha	Sicilian – Syracuse	owned prohibited books and allowed others to read them	Member of the Order
1547	3B:34:473v.	Don Andrea Azar	Maltese – Rabat	owner of prohibited books	Teacher of Mdina Grammar School and Curate of Sigglewi Parish Church
1547	3B:34:473v.	Don Federico Scolaro	Maltese – ?	perused prohibited books	priest and scholar
1547	3B:34:473v.	Flacido Abel	Maltese – ?	perused prohibited books	notary and scholar
1547	3B:34:473v.	Jacobo Baldacchino	Maltese – ?	perused prohibited books	notary
1557	3B:34:474-476	Don Brandano Cassar	Maltese – Mdina	perused prohibited books	priest
1557	3B:34:474-476	Fra Pierre Mequin	French – Borgo	owner of prohibited books	Infermiere of the Holy Infirmary Knight of the Order
1557	3B:34:474-476	Simon Provost	Flemish – Borgo	perused prohibited books	member of the Order Master of the Mint, and silversmith
1557	3B:34:474-476	Fra servant-at- arms	French – Borgo	perused prohibited books	Setto Mastro of the Grand Master's house, member of the Order
2.9.1561	142:1:1-7	Pietro Cumbo	Maltese – ?	perused prohibited books	
22.6.1563	142:3:10-17	Gio.Maria Bonello	Maltese – Mdina	perused prohibited books	silversmith
22.6.1563	142:3:10-17	Antonio Bonello	Maltese – ?	perused prohibited books	medical doctor
22.6.1563	142:3:10-17	Lorenzo Falsan	Maltese – ?	perused prohibited books	
June 1563	3B:34:473-473v.	Mastro Natale Cassar	Maltese – ?	perused prohibited books	gunner
June 1563	3B:34:473-473v.	Giovanni Formosa	Maltese – ?	perused prohibited books	Capo Mastro of the Galley Capitana
June 1563	3B:34:473-473v	Don Francesco Gesuaido	French – Borgo	owner of prohibited books	ordained member of the Order
June 1563	3B:34:473-473v	Dr. Petro Stumica	Maltese –	perused prohibited books	Lawyer

June 1563	3B:34:473-473v	Gio. Francesco Ferrer	? - ?	perused prohibited books	
June 1563	3B:34:473-473v	Gio. Maria Bonello	Maltese -	perused prohibited books	silversmith
June 1563	3B:34:473-473v	Antonio Bonello	Maltese -?	perused prohibited books	medical doctor
June 1563	3B:34:473-473v	Lorenzo Falson	Maltese -?	perused prohibited books	
June 1563	3B:34:473-473v	Fra Honorato Resicati	Nice - Borgo	owner of prohibited books	Master of the Abacus and member of the Order
June 1563	3B:34:473-473	Giusto Sebastiano	? - Borgo	perused prohibited books	there were other persons not mentioned in the ms. who read prohibited books
1 September 1563	3B:37:493-494	Fra Nicola de Phiumarcum	French - Borgo	owner of books	Knight of the Order
1 September 1563	3B:37:493-494	Fra Scorne	French - Borgo	owner of prohibited books	Knight of the Order
Cubelles 1561-1566	1A:3:36-36v	Nicola Antonio Xarri	Maltese - Siggiewi	owner of prohibited books	
3 June 1574	3B:54:527-530	Bartholomeo Haxira	Maltese - Mdina	perused prohibited books	Notary
3 June 1574	3B:54:527-530	Matthieu Falsona	Maltese -	perused prohibited books	
4 July 1574	3B:44:504-506	Bartholomeo Haxira	Maltese - Mdina	perused prohibited books	Notary
26 August 1574	2B:31:302-304	Jacobo Baldacchino	Maltese - Mdina	owner of prohibited books on magic and necromancy	Notary
30 November 1574	2C:50:962-1027	Antonio dello Ra	Maltese - Syracuse	perused prohibited books	
9 July 1577	1B:35:398-399	Don Federico Attard	Maltese - Zebbug	owner of prohibited books	Parish priest of Zebbug
11 September 1577	4A:4:27-32	Fra Francesco Condulli	? - Valletta	owner of books	His books were burnt. Member of the Order; Chaplain-Priory of Portugal
10 December 1579	1B:49:478-481	Nicola Romano	? - Borgo	perused prohibited books	Student at school of Cleric Bernardino (Frenchman)